

Analysis on chivalry and its influence

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Abstract: Knights appeared and flourished in the Middle Ages. Some scholars call the Middle Ages the ages of knights. Knights were cavalymen in heavy armors and played a decisive role in the battlefield in the Middle Ages. They were also an important social class and strictly abided by the code of chivalry, which had a far reaching impact on the social culture and attitudes towards women of the Western Europe even after the decline of the knighthood.

Key words: the Middle Ages; knight; chivalry; influence

1. Introduction

Knights existed from the year 800 A.D. to the year 1450 A.D.. Knights were an important class and played an important role on the medieval stage of Europe. Today we can only see them in movies or books as a group of courageous men who killed dragons or rescued princesses.

Knights have become a legend. But as a fascinating topic, they are not forgotten. There have been books written about them for more than 500 years, such as *King Arthur & the knights of the round table*, *King Arthur and Merlin*, *The death of King Arthur*, *The song of Roland*, and some of them are still in print, such as *A Knight's own book of chivalry* and *Book of knighthood and chivalry: With the anonymous Ordene De Chevalerie*. With courage and loyalty as the core, knights' spirit—chivalry produced a prominent effect on the civilization and thoughts in the Middle Ages of Europe.

2. History of medieval knights

Knights of the Middle Ages had its genesis from the reign of the Frankish emperor Charlemagne. The Germanic tribes occupied Europe from the 3rd century A.D.. Mounted soldiers were not rare in their armies. Some portions of the armies had always been mounted, and some armies comprised mainly of cavalry. However, it was during the period of the Franks that knights began to show their power. The Franks came to dominate the western and central Europe after the fall of Rome in the west. Generally their fielded armies composed of large masses of infantry with comitatus, infantry elites, who often rode to battle on horseback rather than marching on foot. Riding to battle had two key advantages: It prevented fatigue, particularly when the elite soldiers wore armor; and it gave the soldiers more mobility to react to the raids of the enemy. The elites rode to battle but dismounted to fight in order to provide a hard core for the levy of the infantry war bands.

As the 8th century progressed into the Carolingian Age, the Franks were generally on the attack, and larger numbers of warriors took to their horses to ride with the Emperor in his wide-ranging campaigns of conquest. And this was due to the appearance of the stirrup which made the mounted men more powerful in the battles and turned cavalry into the most important element of medieval armies. These mobile mounted warriors made Charlemagne's far-flung conquests possible. To secure their service, the land called benefices was given to the

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captains directly by the emperor to reward their efforts in the conquests. And in turn, the captains were to grant benefices to their warrior contingents, who were a mix of free and unfree men. In the century following Charlemagne's death, this newly empowered warrior class grew stronger and Charles the Bald declared their fiefs to be hereditary. The period of chaos in the 9th and 10th centuries, between the fall of the Carolingian central authority and the rise of separate western and eastern Frankish kingdoms, entrenched this newly-landed warrior class because governing power and defense against Viking, Magyar and Saracen attack became an essentially local affair which revolved around these new hereditary local lords and their demesnes. The resulting hereditary landed classes of mounted warriors, the knights, were increasingly seen as the only true soldiers of Europe.

During the Crusades, knights entered into its golden age and the crusader was the pattern of the perfect knight. The knights regarded the rescue of the holy places of Palestine from Moslem's domination and the defense of pilgrims as their holy duty. In return for their work, the church took them under her protection in a special way, and conferred upon them exceptional temporal and spiritual privileges, such as the remission of all penances and dispensation from the jurisdiction of the secular courts. As a means of defraying the expenses of the journey to the Holy Land, they were granted the tenth of all the church revenues.

After the conquest of Jerusalem, in order to prevent the loss of the Holy City to surrounding hostile nation, the necessity of a standing army became peremptory. Out of this necessity arose the military orders of perpetual warfare against the infidels. In these orders, the religious and the military spirit of knights merged perfectly. Chivalry reached its highest point. The knightly duties and military orders enrolled them in a vast brotherhood of manners, ideas and aims. The knights had imposed on them fidelity to their lords and to their words, fair play on the battlefield, and the observance of maxims of honour and courtesy.

After the Crusades, knights gradually lost its religious duties. Honour remained the peculiar worship of knighthood. This spirit was manifested in many knightly exploits which filled the annals of the long contest between England and France during the Hundred Years War. Bloody battles alternated with tournaments and gorgeous pageants. And under the influence of romance, love now became the mainspring of chivalry. As a consequence, there arose a new type of chevalier, vowed to the service of some noble lady, who could even be another man's wife.

With the advent of gunpowder and the general use of firearms in battle, infantry, on its revival as an effective force on the battlefield during the 14th century began to challenge the supremacy which heavy cavalry had so long, enjoyed. Knights rapidly disintegrated and finally disappeared altogether. Chivalry became a mere court service and the sport of jousts and tournaments became the most serious business of knights. These "war games" consisted of individual contests and group combat. Prizes were given to the winners, and some knights, such as the famous William Marshall, made their fortunes on the tournament circuit. By the 14th century, tournaments became rousing fairs complete with singing, dancing and feasting which might last for several days. Chivalry had degenerated to a futile pastime and an empty promise.

3. Knights' belief: Code of chivalry

The term "chivalry" is derived from the Middle English word "chivalrie", and from Middle French "chevalerie", meaning "warrior on horseback". Other meanings of the word have included "mounted men-at-arms", "knightly skill" and "gallant or distinguished gentlemen"¹. But in the Middle Ages chivalry meant a code of behavior that medieval knights followed. There was no one exact code of honor or chivalry used by all the knights. However, many of them followed a consistent set of beliefs, which were recorded in writing during

¹ From the *Merriam-Webster online dictionary*.

medieval times. While chivalry had its beginning around the 9th and 10th centuries, this system flourished in the 12th and 13th centuries. Chivalry faded toward the end of the Middle Ages. However, its ideals influenced standards of behavior for gentlemen and the nobility through the Renaissance in the 16th century.

Knights believed in the code of chivalry. When they were knighted, they had to make a vow. In the vow, they promised to defend the weak, be courteous to all women, be loyal to their king, and serve God at all times. Knights were expected to be humble before others, especially their superiors. They were also expected to not “talk too much”. In other words, they should not boast. The code of chivalry demanded that a knight give mercy to a vanquished enemy. *The song of Roland*, a full portrait of the excellent knight from the actual society, was an epic of medieval France and became knight’s manual in the medieval society.

However, the very fact that knights were trained as men of war belied the code of chivalry. Even though they came from rich families, many knights were not their families’ firstborn. They did not receive an inheritance. Thus they were little more than mercenaries. They plundered villages or cities that they captured, often defiling and destroying churches and other properties. Also the code of chivalry did not extend to the peasants. The “weak” was widely interpreted as “noble women and children”. They were often brutal to common folk. They could sometimes even rape young peasant women without fear of reprisal, all because they were part of the upper class. This code was rarely lived up to, but it remained the standard for chivalry and proper behavior amongst the nobility for centuries.

4. Training needed to be a knight

The road to be a knight takes a long time. When a boy born by a knight turned 6 or 7, he was sent from his home to a nearby castle. There, he, as a page, was trained by the lord of the castle as a knight. The page waited on his lord and lady. It was his duty and privilege to accompany his lord and lady at all times. He helped his lord dress and put on armor. More importantly, he played many training games including wrestling, piggy-back wrestling, sword practice and lance practice. He learned how to hunt and hawk. The noble women of the manor taught him table manners. He was taught to be quick, graceful and flexible. He also received religious training from the chaplain. A page rarely ever learned how to read or write because it was not thought to be very knightly.

If the page showed promise, then at the age of 14, he became a squire, a knight’s personal servant. He had to serve the knight, keeping his weapons and armor clean, taking care of his horses, making sure his clothes washed and serving him at meals. But most importantly, because he started to get into his manhood, his training would focus more on weapons, horsemanship and mounted combat skills. It was this mounted tactics that made a knight a fearless and respected man. He also learned the duties and responsibilities of a knight. As the squire became older, he was expected to follow his master into battles. He was allowed to carry a sword and a shield. In battles, a squire would bring his knight replacements of lances, swords, horses, or any item lost or damaged in battles.

When the squire was judged ready to become a knight, usually between 18 and 21, a special knighting ceremony would be arranged for him. On the night before the ceremony, the squire had to take a bath and make confessions. He would pray to God for guidance in his journey as a knight the whole night. The next morning, dressing in white tunic, he would enter the crowded hall of the church with his sword strung around his neck. The priest would bless the sword first. After that, the squire would kneel down before his lord, who had trained him for years. The lord asked him the reasons for being a knight. If he was satisfied with his answer, the lord would agree to perform the ceremony. Then, after dressed a new armor, the boy would kneel down again before the master. He then took the sword and tap on the boy’s shoulders three times as he made a short declaration as “In the name of God and Saint George, I make thee a knight” (Bulfinch, Thomas, 2000, p. 7). Then the new knight would receive his sword, lance and golden spurs. Each of the weapons had a good meaning. The lance had a saying. It was said,

“As fear of the lance drives back the unarmed, so the knight drives back the enemies of the church” (Baker, Alan, 2003, p. 178). As for the sword, it was said that, “The two edges of the sword show that the knight serves God and the people” (Baker, Alan, 2003, p. 178). With the end of the ceremony, the squire became a knight. But this was just the beginning of the young man’s career as a knight. The promotion to a knight was correlated tightly to his battle achievements. Only by war can he get the rank of nobility and wealth.

Tournaments provided a means for knights to practice warfare and build their strength in times of peace. Tournaments were essentially mock battles with audiences. The audience was usually made up of fair damsels. This was another way in which a knight was expected to act chivalrous. The tournaments had different rules that had to be followed. They were judged by umpires that watched for dishonest play. Tournaments were usually fought between either two people or two teams. If two people fought a tournament, it was usually by jousting. The two knights would gallop across the playing field at each other. They carried long, blunt poles and shields. The objective was to knock the other person out of his saddle. Team play was conducted with fierce mock combat between two bands of fighters. They fought with wooden or blunted weapons so as to reduce the risk of getting hurt.

5. The end of knighthood

As a military institution, knighthood was on the wane from the late 13th century on. In the late Middle Ages, many prospective knights began to pay “shield money” to their lord so that they would not have to serve in the king’s army. The money was then used to create a professional army that was paid and supported by the king. Kings still summoned their knights for wars, but increasingly they turned to other sources of manpower, namely mercenaries whose use became common in the 14th century. The war preparations of Henry V of England showed how the king formed an army: He signed dozens of contracts with individuals who pledged to provide a specified number of men-at-arms and archers at muster time.

Knights were a great means of fighting at the battle field. But their martial advantage graduated into uselessness when guns and cannons appeared and became more powerful weapons. The development of gunpowder and increasingly more powerful archery meant that the use of massive cavalry charges to break enemy lines and carry swift victory could not be relied upon, and the dominance of cavalry came to an end. If any battle summed up this change, it was the battle of Agincourt in 1415. The French learned their lesson. Charles VII, who finally expelled the English, and formed the first standing, professional army in Europe.

However, the chivalric ideals continued to live on, perhaps precisely because the reality of knighthood had disappeared, and a free rein was given to its romanticizing. Tournaments were favorite entertainment at the French court of the 16th century. More and more elaborate suits of armor were forged for pure display, in increasingly baroque imitations of earlier models.

6. Influence of chivalry

In the military sense, knights, the professional soldiers of the Middle Ages, were the heavy cavalry which constituted the chief and most effective warlike force. The armors of knights made them the winner in the battle field. Unfortunately, the armors caused the innovation of military technology as well. The knight was one of the three types of fighting men during the Middle Ages: Knights, foot soldiers and archers. A knight was armed and armored to the teeth. With the metal protection, an armored knight is a moving castle. It was impossible to kill him with a sword or lance. No single foot soldier or archer could stand up to any one knight. The need to break the impenetrable armors was urgent. This problem was solved after gunpowder imported to the Europe from China.

With the invention of gun and cannon, armored knights were destroyed easily.

The knights' love concept became an important part of the chivalry and was a rebel to the asceticism preached by the church. Knights' love concept appeared in the age when God was the absolute authority in the minds of people. The idea that women were the source of evil was widely accepted in the early Middle Ages. The church vigorously preached men's superiority to women, strongly belittled women's status, and emphasized women's dependence on and obedience to men. Thus, asceticism naturally became the doctrine publicized by the church. But this began to change after the formation of knights' love concept and its assimilation into code of chivalry in the late of 11th century and early of 12th century. In the eyes of knights, women, especially the noble women, were the persons of admiration. They respected them for their noble status and lofty qualities. They praised them for their beauties. They regarded themselves as the servant of the noble women. They showed unswerving loyalty to them, protected them from any danger and defended them in time of need. In order to obtain good graces of noble women and princess, they fought and sacrificed for their love without expecting any reward. A word of compliment was enough. Knights' love concept included ideas of loyalty and obedience, but not equality. It did not regard marriage as the last goal. This love affair was condemned by some scholars nowadays. But in the Middle Ages, knights' love concept broke the confinement of asceticism, showed personal desires, and contributed to the emergence of humanism. At the same time, it made possible the transition from sacred love for God to the secular love for human beings, and showed the changing idea of esthetics from theology faith to secular taste. The knights' emphasis on personality and individualism, which had been spread widely by knights' attitude towards love and by the literature works about knights as well, had great influence on the humanism in the Renaissance in the 16th century.

Code of chivalry was not abandoned with the decline of knightly class. On the contrary, the knights' code of chivalry heightened the ideas, ethics, and sentiment that were once respected and approbated by Western European in the Middle Ages. Some of them were accepted as the conduct of the whole society. One who conformed to the code and performed it could be treated as heroes and models. The admiration and following of the code of chivalry of the whole society was the result of the spread and recognition of the epopees, and romaunt about knights. The heroes in them not only invigorated the knights themselves, but also the other classes.

7. Conclusion

Knights used to be a great means of fighting before the appearance of guns and cannons. Nowadays knights as a legend, is remembered for their heroic character, invincible strength and courage, justice, loyalty to superiors, compassion to weakness and courtesy to ladies. These chivalric qualities are the basis of civilization in Europe after the Middle Ages.

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